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UnitarianTorch contact: kokenyesi@unitariantorch.com

True Fairy Tale

"And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men."

Luke 2:13-14 NKJV

Gathered Celebrants, My Dear Brethren!

Among our holiday worship services the most extraordinary is the Saturday of Christmas. On that occasion we not only listen to the message of the evangelium (the Gospel). The important aspects that evening are not only to listen to helpful advice, to the admonishments, and to the good news of the Gospel; that evening is not only the beginning of forgiveness, and of the hope for the future, but it is also the source of the unique spirit of the church, the anticipation of magic in the coming of the angels, and of our and everyone else's tremendous joy.

Why do we feel and think like that about that evening? We feel like that, because despite the fact that we are grownups, we still love the spirit of a fairy tale, the magical good news from the angels, and we like to break out of the bleakness of our workdays. We feel like that, because this holiday celebration is for children, and we feel like children all over again.

In all of us there hides an inner child, but many of us have forgotten what it felt like to be a child. We don't allow our childhood memories to rise to the surface, perhaps, because we believe it appears childish for adults to be like a child.

Today I want to ask all of you to forget for a few hours that we are grownups, and to immerse ourselves into Christmas with the simplicity of a child.

A few years ago I took a pedagogy refresher course. The theme of the refresher was: making connections between children and educators through fairy tales. Our group had to construct a fairy tale using the events that surrounded our arrival at the refresher. So, we began spinning our own tales first, but then eventually, almost magically, a single wonderful story came together featuring magic spells fairy princesses, and witches.

The leader of the refresher listened very carefully to our tales, and then told us that our tale had two flaws: first, it didn't start with "Once upon a time", and the second was that we didn't close with "They lived happily ever after". Without those two elements our tale wasn't truly a tale.

Dear already grown up children -- and still-growing children!

Once upon a time there was a dirt poor family. The husband was called Joseph, and his wife was called Mary. They lived in the country of honey and milk, yet they were poor. On top of that, to make matters worse, an enemy was occupying their country. The Emperor of the occupiers ordered that everyone must register in the town of their birth for a census headcount, and for an accounting of their property. For that reason, Joseph and Mary traveled from Nazareth to Bethlehem, the town of their birth.

In those days traveling wasn't all that easy. Days, weeks, and months passed while they were traveling to Bethlehem. Joseph and Mary were fortunate, because they had a donkey, and they could rest periodically while riding the donkey. They needed to rest -- especially Mary who was pregnant -- and without rests the stress of travel would have been too much on her.

After great many days they arrived, exhausted, in Bethlehem. There were many new arrivals, and all the inns were filled to capacity. They couldn't find temporary shelter anywhere. They almost gave up their search, when one of the innkeepers took pity on them, and offered them the barn where they could stay in privacy, as long as they are not bothered by being close to the livestock. Mary and Joseph knew they liked animals, and they knew they would be just fine close to them, and anyway, as long as they do have a place to rest, they didn't mind exactly where. They quickly settled into their very modest accommodation which became more like a home after the arrival of their first born son. Joseph, being a carpenter, quickly fashioned a cradle out of the manger, and he padded it with hay, and that is where they looked admiringly at their son. Their happiness was complete; their hopes were fulfilled. They thanked God who looked after them through the arduous journey. They rejoiced over God's providence.

While that was happening at the inn, in a not too distant location, on the outskirts of Bethlehem, shepherds were dwelling, preparing to turn in for the night. They were sitting around their campfire talking about the events of the day, discussing politics as they seethed about the cruelty of the oppressors. They thanked God for His continued help. Then an unusual brightness disrupted their evening activities. And the sun wasn't even up! In the pitch dark night suddenly there was such brightness that it rivaled daytime. They were concerned, because they didn't know what it all meant. As they had been living outdoors, they had experienced a lot -- falling stars, the brilliant stream of the Milky Way, the shiny Moon with its halo, close by lightning strikes, but they had not seen anything like this. No wonder they were frightened, not only for themselves, but also for their flocks that could be riled up and scatter because of the spectacle in the heavens. As they were getting ready to check on their flocks, a soft voice told them "Do not be afraid, because I am bringing you good news that will be a great joy to all the people." Upon hearing the voice of the angel announcing the good news, the shepherds knew immediately that the brightness didn't mean trouble. They knew that angels were peaceful, well-meaning creatures who helped people. They followed the instruction of the angel, and started towards the nearby town to pay their respects to the newborn, who, according to the promise, would be the king of the entire world.

While this was happening, somewhere, far to the East, there were three wise teachers, astronomers, who had been scanning the sky for months to track a very peculiar star. They observed a very large star that appeared in the sky, but they didn't know the meaning of this unusual object the likeness of which had never been seen before. They agreed to meet in council to discuss it. One wise man said: "I'm certain that there will be a big change in the world." The second said: "I'm certain that a great king was born." The third, the oldest and the wisest stroke his beard and quietly said: "A great king was born who will change the world."

They quickly broke council, and began to follow the star, so they could express their adoration to the new king. They arrived at the land of Israel, into the city of the royal palace, and looked for the young king. Herod, the king of the Jews was surprised, because he didn't have a newborn son. Herod was alarmed, because if the story of the wise men were true, then his rule may be ending, and a foreign king might attack his kingdom. He devised a clever plan, and told the wise men: "Go find this new king, and if you do, then tell me about him when you return, so I can visit him and pay my respects to him."

The wise men of the East continued to follow the star, and this is how they found Bethlehem, the inn, and the small family in it. The wise men presented their gifts of gold, myrrh, and frankincense, and stayed with them for the night. The next day they started their journey back to the East. On their way to back the capitol, an angel appeared in the dream of one of the wise men, and the angel warned him about Herod's ploy, so the wise men continued their journey home on a different road.

For a while Herod waited for the wise men, but then, when he was sure they left the country, he ordered his soldiers to kill all newborn children in the country.

There was crying and wailing all throughout the country. Before the soldiers came to Bethlehem, an angel appeared in a dream of Joseph, and warned the carpenter about the approaching danger, so Joseph and his family escaped to the nearby country of Egypt. They returned to Israel only after the cruel Herod died. The family lived happily, and the child grew in body and spirit surrounded by kindness of God towards the people.

And that's all folks; anyone doubting this can investigate it for themselves.

Dear Gathered Celebrants, My Dear Brethren! I intentionally ended the story that way, because the question: Is the story true or is it just a "tale"? may linger on everyone's mind. Is it a legend or is it a literal truth? Who are those angels; what do they look like; why do they appear such a peculiar fashion in the midst of brightness or in a dream? Is that a vision, or is it verifiable by an alert, sober, conscious mind? And just what was that star in the sky? Could there be heavenly signs for the birth of a child? And is the fate of that child written in the sky at the time of the birth of the child?

These types of questions arise in us modern-day, knowledgeable people. We want answers that we can physically verify. We have a hard time shifting our ground, breaking away from our corporeal nature.

I'm not trying to say that we shouldn't have both our feet on the ground, because such kind of street smartness is essential nowadays, but besides that, we ought to occasionally rise above our everyday self, and believe in tales and legends.

A lot of the times we should be believing and sensing instead of wanting to observe and verify.

I wonder what would happen to our ancient legends, sagas, and tales if, in search of their real-life basis, we would remove the less believable elements from them? How would the legend of the Enchanted Stag read if we left out the fairies, or the magical stag itself? What would happen to the legends of the Hole in the Stone, the Horse of Firtos, or Bear Lake if we left out the kindness of fairies, the largesse of love, or if we leached out the goodness and the beauty, as well as their victory over evil and repulsive?

If our ancestors had left out those components, we wouldn't have those tales and legends. The stories would have withered into nothingness, because the importance of tales and legends is not in their historical nature, but, rather, in their message, their story line where good and evil struggle, where poor and modest young men can be victorious even over dragons, where good expresses its truth, and where love conquers hate and envy.

That is why I don't inquire into who the angels were and how they looked. That is why I don't inquire into if there truly was a bright star in the sky, or if there were wise men of the East, because I know that they must have existed, because that is the only way innocence could have triumphed. It is the only way the Prince of Truth could have remained alive; it is the only way that the two commandments of love could have become the Gospel for everyone; it is the only way we can celebrate Christmas and appreciate that goodness, truth and love are always victorious.

Let us become the characters of the fairy tale that is playing out in our lives; let us become angels, fairies in it, and be victorious over our fears. Amen